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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN'S MEDIA COMMISSION: UP AND RUNNING

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The newly-created Media Commission, slated to play an important role in the upcoming presidential election, is now up and running. In addition to monitoring compliance with the media code of conduct, the Commission intends to organize radio and TV airtime for candidate roundtables, offering the airtime to candidates on an equitable basis. The Commission has restricted inherent powers to sanction violators of the code, and will look to international partners for support throughout the campaign process. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Chief Commissioner Sidiquallah Towhidi told the international election stakeholders meeting on May 31 that the Media Commission is up and running, with five commissioners in place, two of whom are women. He explained the procedures the Commission would use in allegations of violations of the IEC-drafted code of conduct for media during the election campaign. In case of violations, the Commission has limited inherent powers. It can request a retraction or correction from the offending party, or the right of reply for the offended party. If these remedies are not applicable or responded to, the Commission intends to refer such matters either to the Justice Ministry for prosecution, or to the Ministry of Information and Tourism's internal Media Commission - the downside of which, as Tahidi commented candidly, is that the Information Minister is widely viewed as a close Karzai ally.

¶3. (SBU) Towhidi said the Commission plans to purchase air time on five TV and ten radio stations in order to air candidate roundtables and individual candidate spots; candidates would be eligible to take advantage of this air time on an equitable basis. Subsequently, Commission staff told us they would meet with commercial media next week to iron out the terms of providing this air time.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to Towhidi, the other commissioners include Fawzia Nazari, Dad Mohammad Annaby; Huda Yasmin Noori; M. Arif Gharwal. The Media Commission expanded from three to five members for the 2009 election. Most commissioners have a journalism background and two served previously on the previous media commission.

¶5. (SBU) The media commission has four main tasks: a. Monitor the coverage of the electoral campaign by the mass media; b. Address complaints of alleged breaches of fair reporting and coverage of the political campaign and other violations of the mass media code of conduct; c. Set up and oversee the sponsored advertising program that will provide each candidate with free of cost airtime on radio or television including several roundtables where candidates appear together for discussion; d. Verify the silence period in the media during the 48 hours before the commencement of polling and on election day. During the silence period, the media should not cover any candidate's political activity, nor publish or broadcast any results from the opinion surveys or exit polls. The Media Commission will likely contract for the media monitoring and sponsored airtime/roundtable events.

¶6. (SBU) Any registered voter, political party, candidate or their representative can file a complaint in case of violation of the media Code of Conduct. The complaint needs to be made on a form issued by the Media Commission, signed by the witness, and delivered

within 72 hours of the alleged violation to any provincial election office, the Electoral Media Commission, or the IEC.

17. (SBU) Media Monitoring: For clarification, there are several media monitoring activities connected with the IEC. As discussed above, the Media Commission will monitor media coverage of the campaigns. It is hiring 60 monitors to examine print, broadcast and TV discussions in 20 main provinces. The monitoring will begin 20 June and the first media monitoring report is due 29 June. The IEC itself also conducts media monitoring of reporting about the IEC and its activities (across print, radio and television.) Finally, the UNDP-ELECT is contracting for media monitoring to review the entire IEC process and to serve as a balance to the other monitoring efforts.

18. (SBU) Media Code of Conduct requires media institutions and representatives to sign and abide by the following guidelines: a. Refrain from broadcasting or releasing election related reports that could cause violence or tribal, linguistic, regional, ethnic, or religious discrimination; b. ensure all election related reports are prepared with impartiality, accuracy, fairness, and equity; c. provide detailed information to the public concerning the different election processes; d. refrain from printing, broadcasting or publishing incorrect information that could mislead the participants in an election; e. avoid printing, broadcasting or publishing scandalous advertisements or insulting reports about a candidate's personality or behavior that could affect the election results; f. refrain from publishing partial reports and avoid focusing only on activities that support or harm a specific political party or candidate; g. use only the official numbers and information for preparing and publishing reports, and refrain from publishing or broadcasting rumors or gossip; h. specify the sources of opinions and information; i. refrain from accepting any gift or payment from a political party or candidate for broadcasting elections reports; j. when the IEC requests, correct mistakes existing in their election reports as soon as possible; k. respect the decisions of IEC, ECC, and MC, and take the necessary actions for the implementation of their decisions.

19. (SBU) The Media Commission could decide to sanction violations by: a. Issuing a public reprimand to the individual or the Mass Media outlet involved; b. Issuing an order requiring the violator to publish a correction drafted by the Media Commission; c. Requiring its decision to be published by the violator; d. Ordering retraction or right to reply; e. Referring the matter to the IEC, the Electoral Complaints Commission, the Public Prosecution Office or the Media Commission of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism.

10. (SBU) Separate from the Media Commission, the IEC External Affairs Department, headed by Mohammad Farid Afghanzai, handles other media issues. In addition to protocol, this department will: a. prepare and disseminate media statements and briefing documents on behalf of the IEC; b. Contact media for regular media briefings and special media events for the IEC and IECS; c. Prepare and disseminate press releases, media handbooks and brochures; d. Maintain and update the IEC website; e. Ensure the facilitation of requests for interviews with IEC members; f. Collect needed materials and information and respond to information requests from media; g. When appropriate, respond to incorrect information in media; h. Monitor local and national media to gain understanding of the information and messages that are being broadcasted and distributed on the electoral process and IEC; collect and analyze information and prepare adequate response; i. Processing of media applications for accreditation; j. Distribute media credentials.

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